

Chuck Kleinhans

## The Change from Film to Video Pornography: Implications for Analysis

In Paul Thomas Anderson's dramatic feature on porn filmmaking, *Boogie Nights* (1997), the initial half of the film closes during a 1979 "end of the decade" party at the home of director Jack Horner (Burt Reynolds), who aspires to make quality porn films that people want to see for the story as well as the sex. Amid the partying, a new figure shows up, Floyd Gondolli (Philip Baker Hall), the money man behind the operation to announce that the future of the business is in video production. Horner resists, adamant that he makes film art. But in the second half, in the 1980s, Horner is making fast, cheap videos that he knows are crap, aware that he sold his aspiration for a quick buck. While dramatically condensed for narrative effect, the film shows the remarkable economic, technical, and aesthetic change that video brought to the porn world.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1980s a drastic change took place in U.S. commercial, moving-image pornography. The previously dominant form, the dramatic feature-length theatrical film, almost disappeared as home videocassette pornographies overwhelmed the market. This development was concurrent with changes in the sociopolitical environment, such as a new wave of sexual image censorship, changes in sexual practices and ideologies due to the AIDS crisis, and the increased public visibility of previously stigmatized sexualities such as sadomasochism. Contextual and technological changes produced a new set of conditions for analyzing porn, which now demands new forms of analysis.

This essay serves as a preface to a full consideration of the phenomenon. Adequate data simply does not exist for a complete study. Here, to illustrate the significance of the project for contemporary media and cultural studies, I develop two general areas: a description of the institutional change from film to video porn, and a discussion of the critical problems in advancing an analysis. My general argument is that economic and industrial changes affecting financing, production practice, and diffusion are the dominant factors in pornographic texts' changes during this period. Others have attributed change to other causes: stylistic innovation (using familiar art and literary history concepts), the imperatives

of authorship (the need for makers to change and grow), and presumed close correspondence with changes in social consciousness. (My primary reference throughout is heterosexual pornography; however, from limited research, I'm reasonably sure that the same general conditions apply to gay male pornography.)

Of course, economic influences do not operate alone or as simple prime movers or even as determinations in a last instance that never comes. But economic elements are present and must be accounted for as, in this case, the leading factor in a set of interrelated determinations. Both by training and experience, I tend to approach the study of media initially through a close study of individual texts. But pornography—texts intended (in production and consumption) for sexual arousal—obviously raises, in a distinct way as part of the analysis, questions of individual and collective audience response. In addition, one of the most common strategies in historical, social, and generic media analysis is to relate changes in form or content within a temporal sequence of texts to social factors. This is an especially appealing strategy (in the case of commercial pornography) both by those who want to condemn it and by those who want to defend it. Pornography as social pathology remains a recurrent trope in analysis. I address these questions in my conclusions.

### From Film to Video

*Maybe the Golden Age [in the 1970s] was a rare moment where X tried to mimic Hollywood. Now the videos are like TV shows instead of movies.*

—Actor Joey Silvera, quoted in Oliver and MacDonell 1987, 30

A current commonplace in discussions of heterosexual porn claims that the video product is not only different from film, but aesthetically and erotically inferior to it. A consumer guide's editor sums up the situation circa 1990:

While technology has advanced to the point where the shot-on-video format has overtaken film—and become almost more appealing to a new generation of carnal consumers—the essence of erotic filmmaking has been reduced to its most basic form. Feature adult videos are produced for a few thousand dollars, often shot in one day, and released within a month, only to be rapidly forgotten. Plot has been replaced with premise, the seven sex scenes per movie norm of a few years ago has been cut down to five couplings, with budgets prohibiting the once expected orgy scene. Running times now tend to be just over an hour, while video box covers often incorrectly state them as up to half-an-hour longer. . . . With the advent of home video, it seems that adult movies have been with us forever. Part of that, of course, has to do with the way time has accelerated in America, so that last month's erotic release might well have been created ten years ago. The modern eye reacts rapidly to shortened messages, especially if

they are evocative. What this all means to the porn movie buff is more emphasis on the visual and sexual imagery, and less thought given to established filmmaking philosophy. (Stone 1990)

An industry gossip column repeats the charge more dramatically:

The worst news of the year [1989] was the "project X" video shoot where Stallion Productions attempted to make 100 feature porn videos in one month. After two weeks, fifty or so movies completed, production halted never to begin again. Talent and four technical crews worked day and night, never receiving a penny in salary. All the movies have been sold and released with the performers getting screwed twice! . . . More and more cheap product continued to flood video stores with major manufacturers forced to lower prices to keep up with fly by night video vendors selling inferior quality product for less than five dollars wholesale. . . . The consumers voice some sort of complaint by renting and buying less than in previous years. (Anonymous, 1990, 54)

How did such a situation evolve? To answer this question we must turn to a discussion of the economic basis of commercial porn, understanding that after government censorship restrictions, market conditions are primary in influencing production. In the 1950s, 60 to 70 theaters nationally, mostly in large urban areas, showed soft-core films. In the 1960s, driven by simple economics existing burlesque houses converted completely to film, or had "nudie cuties" replace the traditional live music and comedians who filled in between the strippers.<sup>2</sup> In the early 1970s, following the Supreme Court's ruling that local community standards should set the norm, thus changing local censorship laws, essentially legalized hardcore—explicit genital sexuality. In the 1970s a peak of 780 theaters regularly showed hard-core films.<sup>3</sup> A typical budget of \$100,000 to \$150,000 paid for the production of a feature-length drama shot on 35mm film. By about 1983, approximately 120 new features were available every year. Given the standard practice of a weekly double bill, with a rerun in the B spot, only 52 new films a year were needed by any one theater. Of course more were produced, and theaters did compete within markets, but the lowest-rank theaters simply ran and reran old features. In 1983 there were about 100,000,000 customers for 763 theaters with a total gross of \$364,000,000 admissions (Friend 1984, 23).

But things were already changing:

the video companies such as VCA and Caballero would typically advance \$40–60,000 for the video rights to a theatrical porn film. Then roughly two years ago [1986] they stopped making offers—they decided they could do four shot-on-video programs themselves for the cost of video rights to a single theatrical film. These programs are shot in a single day, with no theatrical value, [director Chuck] Vincent notes. (Cohn 1988, 3, 26)

In the 1990s, a budgeting rule of thumb assumed two video features could be made for about \$15,000, and that involved a two-day shoot, including cast and crew

salaries, equipment rental, and postproduction editing costs (thus producing a feature and its sequel at the same time).

In the 1980s the videocassette recorder entered the home market in a big way. In 1978 150,000 households had VCRs. In 1980 1 percent of U.S. households had VCRs; by the decade's end 70 percent of all households had them—a rate of introduction that exceeds any other consumer communication appliance, including phone, record player, radio, TV, and color TV to that time. At the time of the major 1979–1980 introduction of VCRs, they cost over \$1,000. By the end of the decade the cost was down to about \$200 for a simple model. In the mid-1990s it was common in a middle-income household to find children's bedrooms with their own TV and VCR. By 1997 85,500,000 households had VCRs. The introduction of DVD players around 1997 bolstered by cheap Asian electronics production has been even more spectacular, with 2005 seeing players available for about \$30 retail.

Early on, competing formats (Beta and VHS) and Hollywood film industry reluctance to release films on tape (video being initially perceived as product that competed with theatrical exhibition) produced a limited rental product. Commonplace wisdom in the video business assumed most early purchasers of VCRs were significantly motivated to purchase the device to see pornography at home.<sup>4</sup>

The effect on theatrical porn was profound. By 1987 there were only about 250 theaters (a loss of over 500 venues in 5 years) and the numbers were declining. Distributors had trouble collecting from theaters, subdistributors went bankrupt, and the former percentage-of-house arrangement was replaced by flat rates as low as \$100 per week. By 1987 or so, couples left the theatrical market completely (especially significant in the “quality” suburban theaters, such as the California Pussycat chain). Furthermore, some urban theaters in marginal neighborhoods were lost due to zoning changes and the exercise of eminent domain, moves often linked to property values increasing due to gentrification. (Women Against Pornography in New York City had free rent from real estate developers in the 1980s for their storefront operation giving horror show tours of the 42nd Street porn district.) Most of the remaining theaters began to convert to video projection, simultaneously “plexing” into several screens per theater.

However, the X-rated rental market swelled to an estimated 100,000,000 rentals in 1987: this was the same number of rentals as admissions to adult theaters four years earlier. Nationally by 1990, it was assumed that 20 percent of a typical video store's gross was from adult tapes (and 20 percent from children's tapes). These estimates seemed to be borne out in the floor and shelf space allocations in those stores that carried X-rated material.<sup>5</sup>

While theaters declined, overall production increased drastically. By 1987, 400 new video features a year were produced, only 40 of them shot on film. (With the release of older films on tape, compilations, and such, about 1,500 new releases

appeared each year.) And through video rental and sales, overall availability of adult "movies" increased nationally and for individual consumers. In the late 1980s one mail-order adult-video distributor, Excalibur, advertised that it stocked 9,000 adult titles.

On the exhibition end, theatrical viewing lost out to home viewing (with the significant exceptions of those who did not have privacy for home viewing, although they could still choose peep show viewing—now updated to video viewing—and gay men's theaters that maintained an ongoing importance as meeting places). Women Against Pornography campaigned especially against theatrical pornography at the same moment it was disappearing. Their organizing had virtually no effect on neighborhood video store porn, which typically in the United States consists of a physically segregated display or rental/sales in adult-only stores.

On the production end, film lost out to tape because film is more expensive than video. Video equipment rents for less than film equipment, and it doesn't require the investment in film stock, processing, work print, answer print, audio tape, and sound mixing. By convention and with some basis in reality, film demands highly trained personnel: director of photography, cameraman, magazine loader, lighting crew, two sound people, and, later, specialists for film editing and sound mixing. In contrast, video allows shooting with a smaller crew, with less training. Also, video requires no elaborate post mix if you put live voice on one track and add music to other track later while fading out unwanted sound on the voice track.<sup>6</sup>

There is a significant exception to the video trend: shot-on-film is a selling point, particularly with a "name" director such as Andrew Blake, known for classy production values, and stars who enhance home video diffusion. Film also helps in the foreign theatrical market, which remains strong in Hong Kong, Japan, and Southeast Asia. And it is also a plus for cable distribution (which typically involves recutting as softcore). In the 1990s some video packages prominently displayed a "shot on film" banner to assert quality. And "shot on Betacam SP" becomes another such marker as tapes shot on VHS or digital camcorders multiplied.

For shot-on-video, one- to two-day production is the norm, and the product is increasingly like reality TV rather than dramatic film. In terms of dramatic narration, a simple skit structure replaces dramatic scripting.

"Back in the early '80s, the going rate for an adult film script varied from \$1,500 to \$5,000. With the advent of videotaping around 1985, producers either stopped using scripts or stopped paying for what constituted a script. It was considered too expensive since the budgets for these tapes were so low," [Rick] Marx recalls. (Cohn 1988, 3)

The narrative in porn features tends to move "back" to the more aesthetically primitive stag film or episodic series. Similarly, the acting changes from a style that calls for more character development and some psychological realism to a skit or cartoon-style simplicity. A related factor is actor pay. In the mid-1980s

some female stars asked for and got \$1,500 to \$2,000 a day (men get about half of what women make). With lowered budgets, quick and short shoots without extensive rehearsals or scripts to memorize became the norm.

In the mid-1980s some of the skilled theatrical porn directors found they could bail out of the business and find work shooting low-budget dramas for the product-hungry cable TV market. Their experience allowed them to make fairly slick, quickly produced, low-budget drama on film. Thus *Boogie Nights*'s Jack Horner could have joined the new immigrants trained in Eastern European film schools in making erotic thrillers, muscle-driven action pictures, and cop and private eye pursuits for direct-to-video or direct-to-cable release.

These tendencies become even more exaggerated in the 1990s with the advent of "gonzo" porn. This documentary subgenre typically uses improved small video cameras and desktop, small-format video editing. The camera is often hand-held by the protagonist, who is often also the male star, and the tapes often feature episodes with "amateur" female talent (i.e., previously unknown untrained actors), though they usually seem to be professional sex industry workers. Producer-stars such as Ed Powers, John "Buttman" Stagliano, Ben Dover, and Rodney Moore have recognizable serial product lines.<sup>7</sup>

Among other production changes, the central location became different. Formerly, in the 1970s, New York City was a significant site (using a cinematic and production design style that in many cases could be arguably called New York University-style), as was San Francisco (San Francisco State University-style).<sup>8</sup> Both styles used exteriors prominently, and the urban location becomes a significant part of story line. Larger-budget films often used sound stages and some period pieces were produced with appropriate sets and costumes. In early 1980s and with the shift to video, greater Los Angeles became the dominant center of production. (Although the business always supports some local productions, and imports.) After 1986 due to police restriction following the Traci Lords affair,<sup>9</sup> production changed to the San Fernando Valley, outside LA County. It is now predominantly in the Valley, and due to police and legal restrictions on outdoor location shooting of porn, it is shot almost exclusively indoors. The typical set is a Valley bungalow or townhouse, or sometimes office or warehouse space, furnished with rental furniture. Even transportation transition shots are omitted. Screen talent wear their own off-the-rack clothing until they strip down.

In the early 1990s, major control of distribution (by far the most profitable part of the business) was vested in three companies: Essex, VCA, and Caballero. To avoid legal entanglements (censorship, vice, etc.), distributors purchase from independent producers and no longer finance production. Because of this, there is more competition among producers, who face most of the legal trouble, and therefore they often omit their name from the product/package (Stone 1990).

Video sales are a high-volume, low-expense business, with virtually no warehousing costs and little capital needed. There are some direct market mail order sales to rental stores and to consumers. This has opened the space for some



entrepreneurs to end-run the usual distribution business. (The key examples are Femme, the feminist porn company, and various amateur and specialty lines.) At the consumer end, video rentals are more significant in marketing than video sales. In video rental stores, adult tapes usually rent for the same fee as new-release mainstream features. While the neighborhood mom-and-pop video stores of the early 1980s have been squeezed out by the national chains, those that remain can compete in part because the chains do not carry hardcore (though they do carry softcore such as "erotic thrillers" of the *Body Chemistry* series, and cable packages such as episodes of *Red Shoe Diaries*, etc.).<sup>10</sup> Such local rental outlets maintain their niche by offering a substantial variety and frequent addition of new titles. Hard-core porn is always a staple of adult stores that typically offer peep show viewing, sex toys and clothing, and sexual novelties.

With video sales the general pattern (that developed in the 1980s) is that retail cost drastically changes from \$70 to \$100 per feature-length tape, circa 1980, to \$35 to \$40 for new releases, \$15 to \$25 for basic features in 1990, with some discounters going lower. But this varies somewhat: the cost of specialty videos (sadoomasochist, transvestite, transsexual, etc.) remains high because the niche market will bear it. In general in terms of retail sales and rentals, the consumer now has a wide range of tapes available. The market is much like the former porn magazine market: differentiation by length of tape, production quality, star presence, and topic/narrative/fetish diversity. In addition, porn tapes are seldom copy-guarded, and can be easily duplicated with two VCRs, thus making personal ownership relatively economical.

Both rental and sales face significant pressures from local laws and the cultural climate. Thus Mormon Utah and parts of the Baptist South do not have hardcore, and some suburban jurisdictions keep it at bay. But hardcore is usually available in nearby localities—the urban core and adjacent states.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore direct-market sales avoid local laws, and parcel delivery services avoid any tangles with U.S. mail regulations. Beyond that, in a frequently traveling nation, hardcore can be purchased elsewhere, like fireworks, and used locally. And most large hotel chains offer highly profitable pay-per-view porn, even in the most conservative locales.

The VCR isn't the only significant technological change affecting moving-image porn. The vast expansion of cable, and more recently satellite-dish service, has also provided a range of pornographies. Cable/dish services typically offer some pay-per-view hardcore (usually without close-up details of penetration or male ejaculation). Premium channels, requiring an additional monthly fee beyond the basic cable/dish service (and without commercials except for their own service), such as Showtime, present softcore nightly (full nudity, no erections, simulated intercourse). HBO frequently presents sex with a documentary beard (*G-String Divas*, *Real Sex* and the like). The Internet provides an additional home porn source. On the Internet, while still images and written porn are extensively available from both individual and commercial sites, at present moving-image hardcore

material is available only from commercial sites with a pay-per-view requirement (a credit card, presumably available only to adults) after an initial "teaser." Streaming video downloads escape all local government attempts at control.

### Implications for Analysis

Linda Williams, in *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* develops her analysis of post-1970 pornography using the model of the dramatic fiction feature, beginning with *Deep Throat*. Her pioneering genre discussion comparing feature porn with musical comedies in the chapter, "Generic Pleasures: Number and Narrative," is followed by chapters elaborating this comparison. She deals with sadomasochism narratives, considering sequels to earlier successful films, and the Femme feminist porn. Williams is careful to warn against reading her sample as a narrative of progress (Williams 1989, 268). However, at a deeper/implicit level, the argument's structure reads the historical sequence as generic development, with a conclusion speculating on the Femme films demonstrating a new aesthetic responding to a female presence among makers and audiences.<sup>12</sup> Many readers take up her argument about pornography duplicating dominant habits of interpretation in art history, literature, and media studies. Williams's argument is careful and guarded, but her readers have often ignored the warning. If one only follows her sequential, close textual analyses of exemplary works, it is easy to project a progressive teleology on the genre.<sup>13</sup>

Williams's analysis also vastly privileges feature-length, dramatic narratives shot on film with a traditional script, and classical film narrative style, made by relatively accomplished directors trained in such filmmaking. Researched and written in the early and mid-1980s, the discussion rests on assumptions that now often must be reversed because of the shift to video and quasi-documentary that I outlined above. Even tracing the most aesthetically/erotically accomplished hard-core work of the 1990s such as that of Andrew Blake, we find Blake's films display a non-narrative spectacle that approximates the high-gloss upscale porn of *Penthouse* magazine. All show, no story.

In terms of porn analysis, understanding the transience of a "Golden Age" of X-rated features means revising basic assumptions. Now a comprehensive understanding has to come to terms with the vastly widened spectrum of sexual imagery—ranging from R-rated movies to exclusively adult videos—and with the realities of actual marketplace circulation and use. In terms of titles, the dominant, hard-core, heterosexual porn today displays quasi-documentary, episodic scenes or a casual skit structure rather than a developed narrative. Where framed with a story, the narrative offers only the slightest pretext for the sexual episodes that follow. Character and acting are minimal; display and activity predominate. Analyst John Champagne called for replacing textual analysis with a sociology/ethnography of



porn places and use. I find his fieldwork excellent, but I don't agree that we should discard textual studies. Rather, they need to be more firmly grounded in an understanding of reception and the realities of diffusion, especially institutional ones. The goal should not be simply to construct a canon of film/video porn. We need to understand pornography's full social and cultural significance, including its most marginal and disreputable areas.

Williams concludes by arguing for the then-new Femme group of videos, specifically refuting Andrew Ross's criticism that they may be too sentimental, pretty, "feminine," to be erotic. She projects that the presence of women as makers and consumers of porn may significantly change the field. However, fifteen years later, we can see that Williams's (and many others) optimism regarding feminist effects on the field has not worked out. Commercial hard-core porn's center of gravity has not changed. Softcore has developed in a subgenre of "couples porn" videos, and a considerable expansion of soft-core erotica, often combined with Harlequin-type fantasies or the thriller genre available in video store rental and cable/dish premium channels. The strongest hard-core "feminist" presence seems to be in a subgenre of "girl-girl" porn that features all-female casts in lipstick-lesbian settings. These works include the *Girl World* gym series or *Where The Boy's Aren't* series, and the raunchier "strap on a dildo" subgenre. More obviously feminist work tends to the arty margins; it exists, and is hard-core, but does not seem to have a significant market share. Femme has produced a new feature every year or two, such as Candida Royalle's *Revelations*, a dystopic future fable that approximates independent U.S. or European narratives.<sup>14</sup> Other examples of feminist interest fit more clearly into the artworld and subculture scene, such as the Blush lesbian videos, or the *Real San Francisco Lesbians* series, or the films of Monica Treut, or video artist Shu Lea Cheang's dramatic sci-fi porn feature *I.K.U.* (2000).

The problem of critics' wishful thinking becomes especially acute in dealing with very contemporary cultural work. The investigator is "invested" in the emerging or cutting-edge development. Consequently, what makes innovative porn interesting and gives the analyst the emotional impulse to pursue the study—the phenomenon's newness and its potential—can easily be overanticipated in analysis.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, offbeat directors such as Rinse Dream or F. X. Pope are more interesting because they vary from the norm; their unusual films seem more useful for textual analysis whereas the inept or banal leaves the textual critic little new to say.

A related problem occurs when the critic desires to see variation from the norm as more transgressive than it may be. David James makes a notable and strong argument that amateur porn (made by untrained couples, exchanged with other couples, but also available commercially) can offer a form of cultural resistance; his argument is similar to those of Laura Kipnis on certain porn magazines and subgenres.<sup>16</sup> Yet many currently available "amateur" tapes (many of which seem to be shot by a more expert camera person) for the most part don't simply document activity, but they follow the pace and norms of commercial hardcore

in terms of costume, changing sequence of positions and activities, groaning for the camera, and so on. In everything but (usually) the relative physical/cultural attractiveness of the men, they imitate or even aspire to the dominant commercial norm rather than subvert it.

Since very little reliable information is available about the porn sector, another recurrent problem emerges when critics use speculation in place of actual data, or use dubious "facts." For example, Linda Williams quotes a *Time* magazine article that 40 percent of video porn rentals are by women (Williams 1989, 231). I have seen this figure cited repeatedly (often to argue that women are interested in porn, that it is not only of interest to men, that not all consumers are men, that women form a substantial part of the hardcore market as opposed to the days of theatrical hardcore, etc.), and heard it referred to in discussions (most recently on a panel at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies in 1998). However, the initial source, *Adult Video News*, is a newsletter monthly for video store owners who carry porn. I must say that this figure is so far off the mark—based on my own experience and informal interviews with other porn consumers, store owners, managers, and employees—that I find it totally unbelievable. Four percent seems a far more likely figure (or perhaps 14 percent—I surmise that *Time* got the figure from a phone interview, so perhaps it was misheard). People in the humanities often don't have any experience or training in working with statistics or questioning nonscholarly sources. How anyone ever arrived at this figure remains unexplained. Is it just a guess by an editor? Is it based on polling? Of what kind and of what population? How reliable is this source? (A rival guide, *Adam Film World*, occasionally promotes itself by indicating its competitor guides obviously have a bias favoring their advertisers). Further, even the 40 percent figure doesn't indicate if these women are alone, in female couples, or in heterosexual couples when they rent. Williams herself expresses some skepticism toward the figure, allowing that women often do most of the shopping.

The point is that this statistic has circulated precisely because so few statistics are available, and "40 percent" seems like hard data. Similarly, figures on the actual size of the porn industry circulate without any explanation of the source or method, or the numbers are credited to obviously self-interested sources such as the FBI or other police agencies (interested in inflating the "danger" to get more appropriations), or to the industry itself (interested in seeming more prominent, and thus more respectable), without any further confirmation, or real explanation of what falls under the category "porn": softcore and hardcore? print, video, and pay-per-view? Internet porn? phone sex? strip clubs and topless bars? just the entertainment or also the liquor sales? How would we measure soft-core erotica on HBO and Showtime?<sup>17</sup>

We also need to be aware that the purchase of pornography and its circulation in capitalist exchange are strongly governed by larger economic trends. When general print advertising practices changed in the 1970s, *Playboy* lost major revenue. It was widely known within the industry that the recession of the late

1970s and early 1980s decreased overall sales and profits, driving some publications and outlets out of business. Whatever else it is, people pay for porn out of expendable income, and for the consumer hard times mean less porn or making do with cheaper versions or using the "same old" again rather than buying the new model.

Examining the "research" done for the 1986 Federal Commission on Pornography (the Meese Commission), any experienced analyst could easily conclude that this work was ill-conceived, prejudiced in advance, and patently biased in many cases, as well as being poorly funded. At the same time, a resurgent right in U.S. politics, in both the executive and legislative branches, has created immense barriers to any kind of sex research, especially funding for investigation. Normal social science interviewing and U.S. Census research has been off limits, since the Christian right finds any questioning intrusive and clearly does not want real information on sexual practices to exist or circulate. The right assumes research on sexuality validates what it considers "perversions." That this level of ignorance about social-sexual realities could be validated in the middle of the AIDS crisis and the appearance of new life-threatening sexually transmitted diseases marks the vicious meanness of these politics. Similarly, developing any information about youth's porn use and the information they gain from it is completely impossible. The chief U.S. public health official in the Clinton administration was forced to resign when she simply mentioned that children might masturbate. This lacuna in sex research occurs at the same time we've seen porn vastly more available to youth, especially females, in the home environment. My own informal questioning about this to teens whose parents agree to let me ask (my network of friends, relatives, acquaintances), teachers, and those eighteen years old and over (about their earlier experience) leads me to surmise that most teens and many middle school preteens in the United States, male and female, have the opportunity to view at least some hard-core video porn, though some (usually more religious or conservative) choose not to.<sup>18</sup>

Pornography is an extreme generic form; as such, it presents challenges to notions that are too generalized to deal with its specifics. As a renegade genre and one without any clear production standards, one can find examples of almost anything within it. With over one thousand new titles per year, feature-length, heterosexually aimed "films" on video provide too big a collection for close textual analysis or social science content analysis, even if some archive could provide any consistent collection of the output (unlikely in times of censorship and fear). Yet over time, the field of moving-image pornography does change. Once more noticeable as an innovation, in the late 1980s, bisexual tapes (homosexual male as well as girl-girl and heterosexual coupling) now seem to not be in fashion or have much of a presence in rental/sales. After causing a certain sensation when first introduced, transsexual themes and characters seem to have found a definite but very limited place in the market. Within the gonzo subgenre, for a couple of years in the early 2000s, several producers began a "footsie" cycle with the female part-

ner's feet being used to stimulate the man's penis, and often ending with ejaculation on the foot. But whatever novelty or untapped market this aimed at seemed to dry up quickly. Pro-am (professional and amateur screen talent together, as in the gonzo tapes) goes through phases as well, with a late 1990s vogue for black women who are or portray street prostitutes, as well as blacks joining the perennial cheerleaders or college girls. (Though in my experience, the African American genres are more available in racially diverse Chicago stores than in Oregon, with its minuscule black population.) One obvious question is, who views? Is it primarily across racial lines, staring at the Other, or is it within racial/ethnic boundaries? Does such viewing differ? How? The point is that we don't have any reasonable assessment of the variety of and changes in pornography, much less a theory to explain how fashion functions within this market.

I've tried to broadly sketch some of the institutional context over the past twenty-five years of commercial moving-image porn and to indicate some problems for further research and thinking in this area. These problems are largely pragmatic ones, but ones that seriously shape knowledge in the area. The cultural study of pornographic images and practices needs to advance by overcoming these limits on research. The subjectivity and personal interest that often motivates initial work in cultural studies needs to be balanced by an awareness of the technological, institutional, social, and economic aspects of the topic being investigated.

#### NOTES

Earlier portions of this essay were presented at the Screen Conference, Glasgow, 1992; the Marxist Literary Group Institute on Culture and Society, University of Oregon, 1991; and the Society for Cinema Studies, Washington, D.C., May 1990.

1. While Anderson and others I quote clearly hold to the idea of a "Golden Age" of porn films and a decline with video, my own aim is simply descriptive. I think that these pornographies are basically different, and I'm not concerned here with an evaluation, be that artistic or erotic.

2. The story is told anecdotally in McNeil, and in a comprehensive scholarly analysis in Schaefer's 1999 book on the history of exploitation films and his forthcoming history of porn films.

3. Some films had breakout success and achieved short-run status in regular cinemas, some were shown in midnight screenings, and so on. Jon Lewis provides a detailed analysis of the effects of hardcore on the mainstream industry.

4. In his otherwise comprehensive monograph on the VCR, Frederick Wasser devotes only a few pages to X-rated tapes (2001, 92-94).

5. Throughout the 1980s small local "mom-and-pop" video stores served most of the retail sector while various chains were being established (Blockbuster, West Coast, Hollywood, etc.). Eventually competition by the chains, who offered ample availability of the newest releases, drove most small stores out of operation. Desperately trying to hold onto some market share, the family operations often expanded their porn section, while Blockbuster famously advertised itself as endorsing family values and not carrying any X-rated material. But, in fact, with time it carried softcore.

6. By the late 1980s even music was cut in a cost-saving move.

7. Lehman (1999) describes Powers's product.

8. In contrast to the extremely conventional Hollywood studio formulas that dominated the University of Southern California, NYU favored a more independent style, echoing a long

tradition of New York City production (e.g., Engel, Kubrick, Cassavetes, Woody Allen, Spike Lee). SFSU was also looser in style, often documentary in approach, and, in the 1970s, heavily shaped by the local counterculture lifestyle and ethos. Talent image complemented the visual style: New York City included stylish "native New Yorker" types such as Veronica Hart, zaftig Annie Sprinkle, Latina Vanessa Del Rio, caustic, wiry Bobby Astyr, hairy Jewish Ron Jeremy, and so on. San Francisco featured Faye Dunaway double Annette Haven, Asian-exotic Linda Wong, and a plethora of hippie chicks, as well as the original incarnation of John Holmes, New York City transplant Joey Silvera, and Paul Thomas. 1980s-era Los Angeles featured blonde athletic bodies such as Ginger Lynn, Shauna Grant, and others with notable body modification (implants, labia trims, etc.), as well as gym and tan spa guys such as Peter North.

9. In three years Lords became a major star, with her own production company, but it was discovered she was underage (eighteen) and had worked with a fake identification for this period. All of her films were withdrawn (or her segments were deleted) except for one made after she was eighteen. Subsequently she appeared on talk shows indicating she renounced her hard-core work and moved over to low-budget independent work.

10. Juffer (1998) details female consumption of softcore. Martin's dissertation (1999) analyzes made-for-cable and direct-to-tape soft-core thrillers.

11. For example, traveling on Interstate 80, one can pick up porn in Evanston, Wyoming, an hour from Salt Lake City, and then travel across Utah to find porn available again on the Utah-Nevada border.

12. The second edition expands the final discussion with considerations of gay/lesbian and other pornographies, and her ongoing work has produced a variety of views of new developments, such as explicit sex scenes in some European features.

13. Personal observation of classroom and academic conference discussion, and discussions with colleagues.

14. See Peter Lehman's extended analysis in this volume, which includes an additional commentary on Williams's argument.

15. This problem crops up in some of the graduate student essays in Williams (2004).

16. James's argument is complex and nuanced, especially in its reprinted form in the context of a series of essays on cultural resistance in the margins, as is Kipnis's. A reductionist summary is unfair, and in the case of Kipnis has been used by some to dismiss her work without engaging the issues she raises.

17. Fairly reliable sources: Lane (2000) and Anonymous (2005).

18. I examine how legislative attempts to control child pornography reveal changing attitudes to defining sexual boundaries in Kleinhans (2004).

#### WORKS CITED

- Anonymous. "Notables." *Adam Film World Guide* (June 1990): 54.
- . *Porn Industry Facts*. 2005. www.Court TV. Available at [www.courtstv.com/archive/onair/shows/mugshots/indepth/hollywood/facts1.html](http://www.courtstv.com/archive/onair/shows/mugshots/indepth/hollywood/facts1.html), accessed March 22, 2005.
- Champagne, John. "'Stop Reading Films!': Film Studies, Close Analysis, and Gay Pornography." *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 4 (1997): 76–97.
- Cohn, Lawrence. "Pornmakers Surface in Mainstream." *Variety*, March 9, 1988, 3, 26.
- Friend, Lonn M. "Porn-Film Maker Cecil Howard." *Chic*, January 1984, 22–24, 26, 28, 36.
- James, David E. "Hardcore: Cultural Resistance in the Postmodern." In *Power Misses: Essays across (Un)Popular Culture*, ed. David E. James, 215–229. London: Verso, 1996.
- Juffer, Jane. *At Home with Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.
- Kipnis, Laura. *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*. New York: Grove, 1996.
- Kleinhans, Chuck. "Virtual Child Porn: The Law and the Semiotics of the Image." In *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography, and Power*, 2nd ed., ed. Pamela Church-Gibson, 71–84. London: British Film Institute, 2004.
- Lane, Frederick S. *Obscene Profits: The Entrepreneurs of Pornography in the Cyber Age*. New York: Routledge, 2000.



The Change from Film to Video Pornography

- Lehman, Peter. "Ed Powers and the Fantasy of Documenting Sex." In *Porn 101*, ed. James Elias et al., 359-366. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1999.
- Lewis, Jon. *Hollywood V. Hard Core: How the Struggle over Censorship Saved the Modern Film Industry*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.
- Martin, Nina K. "Encountering Soft-Core Thrills: Gender, Genre, and Feminism in the Erotic Thriller Film." Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1999.
- McNeil, Legs, and Jennifer Osbourne. *The Other Hollywood: The Uncensored Oral History of the Porn Film Industry*. New York: Regan/HarperCollins, 2005.
- Oliver, Doug, and Allan MacDonell. "Fuck Films in Flux: The Slimes They Are a-Changin'." *Hustler*, August 1987, 26-28, 30, 38, 94.
- Ross, Andrew. "The Popularity of Pornography." In *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, ed. Andrew Ross, 171-208, 53-58. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Shaefer, Eric. "Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": *A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999.
- . *Massacre of Pleasure: A History of the Sexploitation Film, 1960-1979*. forthcoming.
- Stone, Jeremy. "Untitled Editorial Introduction to 'Reviews.'" *Adam Film World Guide* (March 1990): 67.
- Wasser, Frederick. *Veni. Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001.
- Williams, Linda. *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible."* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.
- . *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible."* 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- , ed. *Porn Studies*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004.